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# Attorney General Comes Out of the Shadows

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Until about 10 days ago, Attorney General William French Smith was one of the least visible members of President Reagan's Cabinet. For weeks, his press coverage consisted mostly of reports of parties he attended.

Then a couple of stories described the slow pace at the Justice Department and, suddenly, Smith came out of the shadows.

A week ago Thursday he had a news conference and urged repeal of the special prosecutor law. The next day he made a major speech signaling a shift in civil rights policy away from busing and racial quotas, and appeared on public television's MacNeil-Lehrer show.

The other day he invited several regular Justice Department reporters into his private dining room for breakfast. Next week he'll be touring Border Patrol facilities near San Diego and visiting the Los Angeles Times editorial board.

Aides say much of the flurry of activity was planned all along, but they acknowledge that they wanted their boss to speak out more to counter what they consider a mistaken impression that he isn't actively running the department.

Smith said as much to the reporters: "I gather the impression on the outside is that we're not doing anything."

The low-key, silver-haired Smith was stung especially by a short piece in a recent issue of Business Week magazine, which quoted unidentified White House officials as saying things like "He has no known view on any issue," and referring to him as a "somnambulist."

Smith joked at the breakfast that he hadn't found anyone in the White House who could pronounce the four-syllable word for sleepwalker, and added that the only thing he found accurate in the story was "the spelling of my name." He denied that the White House was running his department.

His aides acknowledge, however, that the perception of inactivity by their boss was heightened by several factors. Early claims of Cabinet government envisioned Smith spending considerable time away from the department.

The choice of Edward C. Schmults, an experienced government lawyer, as his deputy, and Smith's refusal to take positions on key issues in congressional hearings and at press appearances added to the image that he wasn't in charge.

One press room war recalled the "Maximum John" nickname of Watergate Judge John J. Sirica and said he thought of Smith as "Minimum Bill."

One Justice Department attorney who has dealt with Smith, but is not a hand-picked aide, said he felt the "public perception of the man is not the man. In private, he's got a good sense of humor, and he asks the right questions.

"His problem is that he's been a private adviser, the kind of lawyer who for 30 years made a lot of money and didn't get his name in the paper a lot. That's how some people measure success. He's just not used to being a public figure."

Smith's spokesman, Tom DeCair, said the 63-year-old attorney general hasn't been able to make more public appearances until recently because he's been busy interviewing lawyers to head his litigating divisions, and studying lists of nominees for judgeships and U.S. attorneys.

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